The Porous University: Impact is not some added extra of academic life, but lies at the core of what we do.

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The current university set up has led to a deep malaise. The culture of retreat and lack of an inclusive commitment has fed public perceptions that universities are unapproachable. **Michael Stewart** *argues that thinking more creatively about impact and problem-based learning could help overcome these failures. The management terminology is brittle and ugly, but all impact means is that we are engaged with the world, trying to make it a better place to live in.*

In the past couple of years there has been a wave of defensive commentary from respected cultural commentators (Marina Warner, Stefan Collini, Martha Nussbaum, Sarah Churchwell to name just the best known) bemoaning what they see as the introduction into higher education of inappropriate managerial practices of setting targets setting and a discursive universe of commercial values. Whether or not the situation is as bad as the critics have it, they are not only in danger of throwing babies out with the bathwater, their reactionary stance utterly fails to address the real challenge of defining the nature of higher education for the rapidly changing world in which we live.

We all agree that Universities are sites where thinking and imagination has to remain 'boundless', 'ungoverned' and open-ended and not be tied down, through some means-end accountability, to any particular practical goal. The question is – how can we continue to ensure that this remains the case. Collini and others in effect argue that we should up the drawbridge and hold off the tide of philistines from the outside. I argue the precise opposite. The real question is how we can break down the walls between universities and the world around them in order to protect open-ended but engaged research.

Universities arose, in the late middle ages, out of and within the monastic model of withdrawal from the world, study, prayer and contemplation and have never entirely broken free from these roots. The idea of closing ourselves off to the world in order to gain distance on its follies, to find the space to think remains a powerful attraction in the sector – indeed Collini in his 2012 philippic, *What are Universities For?* celebrates just this cloistered mindset. But closing ourselves off has the unintended consequence of excluding many who are not like us but might today like to come in.

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The attitude of so many of my colleagues across the sector towards what is grotesquely called ‘the impact agenda’ sums up the problem. In the *Guardian* Alex Preston argues that it leads to a situation were “everywhere, and at all times, the onus is on academics … to justify their existence according to the remorseless and nightmarish logic of the markets”.

The management terminology is brittle and ugly but all impact means is that we are engaged with the world, trying to make it a better place to live in. And this has been for the past two centuries the agenda of all those who have rejected the quietist religious disposition advocated by Cardinal Newman and his followers. Impact is not just – not even mainly – about economics – it is or should be our core activity.

There are three great malaise of the current university set up and odd though it may seem thinking more creatively about impact could help us overcome them all.

1. We are deadly conservative. We don’t want to be. We say we’re not. But we are.

The most dramatic way this shows is in undergraduate education: in crucial respects unchanged over the past 50 years. With 14 times more students taking degrees it remains true that the most clearly identifiable outcome of our teaching is the production of individuals who can replace ourselves. We are not serving our students true needs, but have become rent seekers, sitting like a medieval sovereign on the mint of modern credentials. With an estimated average graduate premium of a lifelong £250,000 (and probably more from leading Russell Group universities) we can clearly recruit for as long as we offer certificates that unlock access to highly selective, high earning professions. But is it that for which we came into higher education?

If we want to rethink, lets look at how people in non-educational settings learn and solve problems. At UCL we have been working ever more closely with a number of arts and performing organisations and there are interesting lessons to be taken. What if we treated our courses like rehearsals at the English National Opera or The Young Vic – how would we work together with our students on creating new knowledge if we worked in a multidisciplinary team for three or four weeks on solving some of the key issues of our time or of scholarly research?

The old way has been to aim to explain to our students what anthropology/ history/ psychology tell us about an issue. In the new model, our students could work with us, for instance, on the question – what should I know and

what should I do if sent to work in Cambodia in 1979, Bosnia in 1995, or Rwanda today? Of course problem-based learning can be more strictly academic – a three week class on whether the rise of social complexity entails political hierarchy comes to my mind as something I would happily work on with my students.

And of course – crucial point – the moment we ask such real world questions the answers stop being disciplinary. We will have to bring multiple disciplines and indeed non-academic outsiders into the classroom. In doing so we will become more relevant to our students' own understanding that problems are not one-sided but multi-faceted and that a single discipline does not address the issues that they want addressed.

In such ways we can begin to create holistic citizens for the 21st Century, citizens whose training in all the 'just in time' knowledge systems of the internet age will prepare them for a world without the traditional career paths of the past.

2. We are not nearly as socially inclusive as we want to be.

We say the right things but need to do more. The intake of the UK's leading universities is socially and ethnically narrow. Have we considered sufficiently how far the way we teach and what we teach might impact upon our attractiveness to people whose parents did not go through the university system?

Apart from the intrinsic merit of protected time or Block teaching, this is also ideally suited for part time or single course only (CPD) students, giving them full if temporary access to the full university learning experience. Of course there are issues of retention and path progression to protect this – but these are technical details.

Such a change could prove transformative: The move to 'learning as rehearsal' would allow us to drop the archaic idea of fixed terms and holidays and the June graduation for all. Think of the nature of a teaching environment with all the generations of our country present! With people coming in to take our new courses for their own sake, for their 'intrinsic' worth – with a university truly serving the whole population of a city it sits within. And for those with a long memory and a more traditionalist disposition, you can see this as merely the reincarnation of our great tradition of extra mural studies – almost killed off over the past forty years.

Beyond the issue of how we teach there is the issue of how we pay for what we want to do. It is one of the most important discoveries of recent years that while it is very hard to raise money in taxation from the wealthier sections of our society, they are more than willing to pay for what they deem necessary. Currently 35% of students in Russell Group Universities come from the privately educated classes – an indication of their continuing prowess at producing university prepared students (since they only educate 18% of sixth formers). But in respect of these students universities are in a very odd position. We claim, with good grounds, that when students come here they will meet with a qualitatively different and more intellectually challenging set up. But these students – all of whom have been paying around £20,000 (or far more) for two years and a good number of whom have been paying that for at least 5 if not 13 years are asked to stump up the same £9,000 as people who could not have dreamt of paying private school fees.

Currently about one third of UCL undergraduates receive financial support. Rather than going backwards to a larger role for direct state allocations we should be pushing for means tested fees that would enable us to offer not £1,000 off the cost of our education to the poorest but a totally free education to them.

At my university we currently have 3,530 undergraduate bursary holders. 44% of them come from households with incomes less than £12k p.a; 28% are in the 12-25k band and 28% in the 25-42k band. They receive £3k, £2k and £1k bursaries respectively as well as some fee reductions. At the same time we have c 5,250 students who have been paying private school fees prior to entry A quick calculation will show that increasing the fees for all students with household incomes sufficient to pay school fees – including all those who have attended private school prior to entry – to say £18,000 pa would at my university produce easily enough funds to provide tuition free and full maintenance support to the poorest students and progressive support for all up to the £42k household income limit.

The wealthy middle class will squeal – but this proposal is pure Bevanism and would make a profound statement of the role of universities in society.

3. Our research environment is enclosed. We aspire to openness, but too often we speak to and work with the usual suspects.

We need to work far more closely with people doing research outside the academy. To do that we have to get beyond the idea that the way people think, solve problems in the outside world is inherently less interesting, less innovative or disruptive.

My view is that Public Engagement is not some added extra of academic life but lies at the core of what we do: And when I talk of public engagement I don't just mean our export led trade with the outside world. For me, even more fundamental is bringing our fellow citizens into our universities and getting them to change the way we do things – the essence of my documentary film work and London's documentary film festival that we created in 2011. The research councils don't know how to measure this yet – but we can work that out.

Universities ought to be the first point of contact for anyone trying to work out how to do things in new ways in their region, how to resolve apparently intractable problems. We deeply resent talk of an ivory tower, but the culture of retreat, withdrawal and quiet contemplation has fed public perceptions that we are unapproachable.

It is extremely difficult to shift the direction of travel of an institution as large and cumbersome as a university. But my own has taken on a potentially transformative commitment – to create a new campus in the former Olympic Park. Nicholas Maxwell at UCL has run a life-long campaign to build a university that does not just teach knowledge but also the wisdom to use that knowledge. And the lesson of his colleague, Jon Agar's monumental history of scientific discovery, the best science today is done when engaged with problems in the 'working worlds' outside the laboratory: the sooner we bring the world of practice and world of experiment together the better the chances for the future of humanity.

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